

This article was the keynote address given at the Fourth Annual Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference at Harvard University on October 25, 1990.

## **What time is it?**

The Soviet Empire is in shambles. Pick up any newspaper today; watch the morning, midday, evening, late night news — the announcements are inescapable — and you will witness, up close and personal, reports of a society profoundly dysfunctional, listing on the edge of chaos. Gorby wins the Nobel prize! But can he salvage his political economy? Will he last? Will the nation?

Most of us have been riveted by such news, by the sights and sounds of walls ripped apart and flooded over by an angry, impatient humanity, unwilling to live by dissembling myths of the past, to live *with* the worsening perils of the moment.

The Eastern Bloc crumbles, and millions of Americans watch — at once riveted and, reassuringly, cocooned by their belief that the Soviets have finally arrived at an inexorable fate, while we, the victors, stand tall and intact, the armor of American might — and ideology — gleaming radiantly throughout the world for others, at best, to emulate, and at least, to defer to.

Few Americans have noticed — in part because our popular media have scarcely bothered to inform us — that here at home, our walls, too, are profoundly fractured and crumbling, that just as the Second World is on the verge of overdue collapse, so is the First.

## **What time is it?**

The mythology of America, the myth of what it means to be an American, is facing, at last, its own inexorable fate. For what this myth required, for too long, for too many of us, was the soul-crushing negation of our lives, the rejection of our most intimate,

deepest, life-sustaining truths. The mythology of America always demanded of its devotees and its victims more than mere assimilation: it forced us to view the best within ourselves as the worst. The most precious within us, that which shaped and nurtured our distinctive characters, our identities, we jettisoned. For the sake of cultural conversion — or better still, conformity — to the status quo, we paid a price, and are paying it still, with currencies of self-abuse, self-hatred, alienation, violence, isolation, silence, and brutal death. The price has been measured in our spiritual devastation — and our blood. And the reason America's walls are finally crumbling is simply this: we are no

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longer willing to bleed, and hence, to pay.

As a Black Gay Signifyin' Butch-Queen devoted to the fine and sometimes *martial* arts of the "Wicked Read" and the "Subversive Snap!" I cannot help but jump with jubilation over the quickening disintegration of the American myth. For this myth has been my prison: each time another hollow pillar of the myth crumbles, I taste freedom, gain new vistas on the world and my life. The Old American Empire — the old, imposed American identity — is cracking up. Our mythic center is no longer holding. Things, I'm happy to announce, are finally falling apart. And I bless this destruction.

With it, you see, arrives my freedom, my too long delayed, my truest emancipation.

Now, I ask,

## what time is it?

Lest our Harvard hosts misunderstand, it is not your buildings, schools, and *houses* of authority I want to burn, or bring down; it is your authority, as such, to dictate my life, my history, my status within the world, your authority, which must be broken. Your house can stand, as long as it's understood to be my house, too, so that I, too, can furnish its learned interior, remodel and repaint it, and add new, more colorful wings should — or better yet, when — the old ones collapse.

Fifteen years ago, I admit, I told a different time. As an undergraduate at this institution, I was as much a prisoner as a student. Like most others, I had come here to learn, but foremost, I had come in search of community, of people like myself — the young, gifted, and Black; Nina's song was my anthem then — who shared my values and concerns, my intellectual and political commitments. I had come to Harvard, naively, in search of my own Black reflection. I awakened, after I arrived, to the realization that I was also gay. And the reflection of myself that this new me suggested, this reflection I found nowhere. Worse, I believed it existed — nowhere.

There were no lesbian/gay studies then. There were no bisexual/lesbian/gay students' associations. There were no "out" faculty, to my knowledge, nor conferences or seminars that addressed, in the remotest way, the turmoil or the raging questions within me. There was no *In the Life*, or *Other Countries*, or *Looking for Langston*, or *Tongues Untied*, or *Gay Men of African Descent*. Nothing ostensibly "gay" seemed to embrace the totality of me; nothing "black" did either.

Most days, at lunch and dinner, over the course of my freshman year, I self-consciously surveyed the dining hall, steered a course beyond the anonymous rows of young white animated faces, among whom I clearly did not belong; moved further still beyond the cluster of “Black Tables,” where I knew deep down, no matter how much I masqueraded, my true self would show and would be shunned; and sat, often alone, eating quickly, hurrying my exit from a room where all eyes, I felt, condemned me with unspoken contempt: misfit, freak, faggot.

Beneath such judgment I did as millions have done before me and since: I withdrew into the shadows of my soul; chained my tongue; attempted, as best as I could, to snuff out the flame of my sexuality; assumed the impassive face and stiff pose of Silent Black Macho. I wore the mask. I was serving time. For what crime I didn’t know. But I wore the mask, however stiff, confining, suffocating: I *served*, in rage, pain, and bitter, needless solitude, for three and a half of my undergraduate years, ignorant that there could be any other way.

## What time was it?

Certainly not “Nation Time,” not for this young, gifted, Black — and queer! — student. No nation, however revolutionary, had dared claim me. No revisionist history, Black, Marxist, or otherwise, dared mention my name.

## Whose time was it?

Certainly not *my* time! Despite Douglass, Tubman, Sojourner, DuBois, Garvey, Langston, Rustin, Ella, Eldridge, Angela, Martin, Malcolm, Stokeley, and Jesse, my time, back then, had decidedly not arrived. No prophets of revolution spoke to me, spoke *of* me. The Last Poets did not mention my name. The New Nationalists, on the rare occasion they acknowledged my existence at all, spoke of me with utter contempt, spat

and twisted my name like the vilest obscenity.

Dutifully, nevertheless, I attended classes, in search of something more than knowledge or scholarship — in search of a history, a culture that spoke to my life. A history and culture that, simply, talked to me.

Because of this search I began a lesson, in truth, I’ve never stopped learning: when nobody speaks your name, or even knows it, you, knowing it, must be the first to speak it. When the existing history and culture do not acknowledge and address you — do not see or talk to you — you must write a new history, shape a new culture, that will.



By the winter of my senior year in college, I learned to speak: my name. At first it was just a whisper. Yet it was not the words I uttered that were most important, but the will to utter them: I am young, Black, and gifted, and gay: from this knowledge, this quiet certainty, I shall not — must not — be moved.

Intent on knowing more about what being gay meant, not so much in the present tense but, typically for me then, in the past, I petitioned my department for a special independent course of study. I asked for an in-person interview with the chair. I did not explain beforehand how “special” my study

would be. I did not deeply weigh what I was doing. Nor did I consider what this revealed of me. I did not know if what I was asking had been asked before. And in an unconscious way, I didn't care. I went before the head of my history department, and asked, with a naive matter-of-factness, whether he, the chair, could advise me in my "special" study. He professorially congratulated my initiative, then asked, in an appropriately professional academic tone, what the nature of my subject was. I, twenty years old, answered quietly: "The evolution of the depiction of male homosexuality in American fiction and poetry."



His jaw did not drop. But the look in his eyes was an equivalent. "I am not an expert," he announced, after a long, long pause, "in that subject." The chair declined to advise me, but granted that I could pursue the course of study if I found someone who would.

I'm sure he knew, as I soon learned, that this was far easier said than done. From one eminent professor to the next I went in search of an advisor. One after another politely but curtly declined me. "Not my expertise," said one; "not familiar with the subject matter," explained another; "never explored *that* particular theme." None of the eminent schol-

ars, I found it odd, would say the word "gay," or even "homosexual." For the first time in my Harvard experience, indirection and ignorance were passed off as virtues.

Still, I continued to look, and eventually, I found him. Not an eminent professor, but a teaching assistant, an inveterate graduate student with a long-overdue, unfinished dissertation on Walt Whitman — a teacher, by Harvard standards, far beneath the first rank. Yet he was the best this institution ever offered me. For one simple reason: the history and culture he sought to share with me, at last, spoke to my life. Talked to *me!* And to my youthful amazement, what I heard in the resonances of this new, living history gave strength and clarity to my own maturing voice.

Now, not only could I read and see and hear the past, discovering new relevance, significance unimagined, but I could also, in turn, speak to this past, and thus re-animate and re-shape it, define it anew. I had begun learning, without conscious intent, the fine and powerful art of Signifyin'.

Paul Alan Marx, advisor, mentor, friend, shaped my life in ways I'm sure he never imagined. Paul Marx is dead. Last year. AIDS. I consecrate this moment to his irrepressible spirit, which even now animates my own, and always will, until I someday join him.

When I consider Paul's life, his death, I perforce reflect on the question: what time it *was* when I first learned to speak, and what time it is now when so many are so intent to once again silence me, by any means necessary.

For the power of Voice which I belatedly learned twelve years ago was the same power that multitudes of Americans — the *true* silent multicultural majority — also discovered, and have effectively used, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. That unprecedented social upheaval liberated the living



— and the dead — from centuries-old, even millennial silence, ancient ghost-like invisibility. Liberated us to speak, sing, and shout ourselves into flesh-and-bone-and-blood existence! We spoke and the foundation of America's mythological identity was rocked. We speak and set off a deafening alarm. Today the ideological prison that has historically contained us fissures, teeters, trembles. It is so powerfully assaulted by the voices and visions of peoples too long oppressed, I do not believe America's essentialist mythic identity — this prison — can much longer stand.

But what our adversaries confront in today's cultural, ideological fragmentation — in the assertion of *our* voices and *our* multiple truths — is something altogether terrifying: they see not the overdue liberation of an oppressed humanity, but the destruction of an ideological fortress that since Columbus has privileged and protected them from scrutiny about their mechanisms of social control. They see, in short, their power, and what is more, the ideological foundation of their power, eroding. Hence their present hysteria, and their ever ready disposition to oppose us with whatever half-assed arsenal they can muster.

## What time is it?

It's truly, for most of us the best and worst of times. For as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, as people of color, as feminists, in short, as the outcast, marginalized collective Other, we have achieved, over humankind's entire history, an unprecedented public visibility, an unparalleled strength to define a world view that affirms the totality of our lives. Isn't this event in this space a metaphor of our achievement?

But in this poised moment, we also face a resistance more resolute, more rabid, than ever.

Consider: the futile but relentlessly savage

attacks on the Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibits; the federal impounding of all slides, negatives, and stills of a San Francisco photographer, internationally acclaimed for his nude portfolio; the arrest and trial of the rap group 2 Live Crew.

Consider: the escalating harrassment of other Black male rappers whose songs boast aggressively political and sexually explicit lyrics; and who have thus drawn the wrath of the government, which now shamelessly deploys the police, the law, the courts to control rap and confine it to a Black cultural ghetto — yet another sorry testament to America's chronic, pathological obsession

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with, and persecution of, the mythic Big Black Dick.

Consider: the censorship cesspool that engulfed the National Endowment for the Arts, and near fatally poisoned it; Congress's legislative presumption that "homoeroticism equals obscenity"; and not least, the Endowment's all too ready willingness to offer progressive, politically engaged artists as sacrificial fodder to appease the blood-lusting Right.

Consider this, and witness conservative/fundamentalist America's ever more desperate attempts not simply to restore "traditional

values,” but to bludgeon us back into historic cells of solitude, shame, and silence.

## What time is it?

It is a paradoxical time of our growing collective strength and the continuing, massive public indifference to our struggles — an indifference that is more than simple apathy, but is rather a willful ignorance and contempt of our lives. It is a time of arrogant indifference, in the midst of AIDS, that kills. An attitude that sanctions, if not secretly applauds, the deaths of thousands, the needless dying of millions. And the consequence of such indifference? Our communi-



ties are robbed, not so much through the regular, warlike attrition of our best and brightest, but by the loss of every man, woman, and child who spent a lifetime learning to speak his or her true, proper name, and was cut short in this profound and noble act of self-articulation.

## What time is it?

It is a time when dykes and faggots are knifed and bludgeoned, too often with impunity, by night and by day, in our own neighborhoods. A time when queer blood runs loose and wild along the curbside. Yet in such savage attacks, the weight of the

crime lies less on the teenaged bigot who wields the bat, the brick, the razor, than on the society whose values, laws, education — and religion — systematically sanction the obscenity of hate-motivated violence.

## What time is it?

Some might say “Queer Nation Time!” But that would be premature, because we still inhabit an age when the laws of the state remain intrinsically designed to safeguard the privileges of whiteness, maleness, and procreative heterosexuality. Challenge this world view in any serious, loud, *effective* way and you risk being cast as a social and criminal outlaw: you risk the outrage and retribution of the State.

Ask the millions embattled by HIV and AIDS what time it is — the millions who regularly clock their dwindling T-cell counts, their diminishing stock of increasingly ineffective AZT, their few, limited alternatives. *Ask these millions* who must clock their draining resources — mental, physical, financial — and must bear the outrage of government and civic leaders who proclaim “compassion for the unfortunate AIDS victims” while systematically undercutting the funding and authority of agencies that could make a difference. Ask these millions — *ask us* — about this profoundly private and public disaster, and what you will hear with the force of a slap is this:

We are in a state of siege. Our lives (people of color, queers, the politically “deviant”) are being systematically locked away in closets, in prisons, in caskets. Our boldest, most life-affirming voices are systematically being silenced by spiritual fatigue, and by slow, agonizing death.

Therefore, whenever we speak the truths of our lives, our words must be more than mere words: Every time we speak, we must engage in the most radical — as in fundamental — form of self-affirmation. As com-



munities historically oppressed through silence, *through the power of Voice* we must seize our freedom, achieve our fullest humanity. Because of this ongoing political, social, and psychological dynamic we have fundamentally redefined Descartes's principle of self-cognition:

"I *speak*, therefore I am."

We speak, creating a world that speaks, in turn, to us. Thus we affirm our right and our fight to live.

We are on the brink, I believe, of a *New Nation Time*. A nation unlikely to be seen until the next century, but coming nonetheless, in which notions of identity — based on gender, race, sexuality or nationality — will explicitly embrace multiple subjectivities of human experience and points of view.

What we as cultural theorists, historians, activists, and students of social change are now challenged with is not just combatting the ideological Right, — whose "consensus" is crumbling, and whose days are decidedly numbered, no matter how much they posture, pray, bash, and sue. Our greatest challenge rests in finding a language, a way of communicating across our subjectivities, across difference, a way of navigating the cultural borders between and *within* us so that we do not replicate the chauvinism and reductive mythologies of the past.

This is no easy task.

An all too frequent and unfortunate pattern among peoples achieving social empowerment is their predisposition to reformulate social hierarchies so that they now become privileged while others are oppressed. The system of hierarchy remains intact; only the relative placement of the groups changes.

The burden of today's historical moment, when identities worldwide are radically reformulating, is for us to speak *to* and *with*

each other, across the borders of cultural identity, across insidious barriers of class and academic training, in ways at times merely honest and inquiring as well as provocative and sharply critical. We must create a cultural language, a notion of identity, which appreciates difference yet escapes the tragic pitfalls of outsider/insider, and the resultant tendency toward an exclusivist subjectivity, toward an uncritical essentialism. Again, this will be no easy task.

Thus far we have opted, for the most part, for a simplistic multiculturalism, a polite, deferential appreciation and respect for cultural pluralism — "diversity" — without

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developing a rigorous discourse that analyzes how multiple subjectivities intersect, compete, and collide.

Perhaps we have failed to do this because it is still very early and many of us have only just learned to speak, to ourselves. But as we contemplate this time in our history and the promise of the time to come, remember the greater work we have to do. For what we do in this dialogue and others like it will decide whether this age is remembered as the advent of a more progressive, inclusive, dynamic construct of humanity or as yet another historical promise, deferred.